

The Socialist and Conscription (1939)

In spite of repeated promises to the contrary, conscription is to become the law of this country during peace time. It is the first occasion that such a drastic denial of democracy will have been brought into operation here when war was not in progress. Already we are warned of the kind of scenes we shall witness—the prosecution of unwilling conscripts, the charges of shirking and the encouragement of tale-bearing by those who suspect their friends and neighbours of avoiding conscription. A Staff Reporter of the *Daily Express* writes:

“Those who are personally summoned and fail to answer will probably be treated as deserters. As in the great war, the authorities are relying on ‘the next-door neighbour with a son in the Army’ to denounce a shirker” (*Daily Express*, 28th April, 1939).

It is worthy of note that conscription has promptly received the support of a leader of the Church, the Bishop of St. Albans.

The Conscription Bill has provoked explanation from the Government and opposition from those who claim to represent the workers. Let us briefly examine the position of the Government that has introduced the measure and the position of those who oppose it. In doing so, we will explain why the attitude of the SOCIALIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN is one of opposition.

One thing we must make clear at the outset. Our opposition to conscription differs fundamentally from that of the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the Pacifists. To the Labour Party and the Communist Party conscription is merely a tactical question—one of policy that may be revised at any moment. To the Pacifist it is a humanitarian question.

To us, however, it is one of the ugly fruits of a social system in which there is a class division between capitalist and worker, a fundamental opposition of interests and hence an opposing class point of view. The threatened war for which it is proposed to call upon conscripts, would be a capitalist war like all modern wars; and just as we are opposed to war on this ground so we are opposed to any form of compulsion being used to force workers to fight for interests that are not their own but their masters’.

Let us now consider the attitude of the Chamberlain Government.

The Attitude of Mr Chamberlain

Obviously the conscription of young men between the ages 20 and 21 cannot be of immediate military value, but it is in the nature of a “gesture”, a counter in the diplomatic game. Mr Chamberlain says that he desires to prevent war breaking out as a result of the aggression of Germany and her allies, and he plans to do this by developing the system of guarantees to the threatened countries. He explained in the House of Commons on 27th April, however, that as the guarantees increased, so did the foreign doubts about the possibility of making them effective. The only way to answer the jibe that the British Government was “ready to fight to the last French soldier” was to introduce conscription and thus provide the necessary trained man-power. Putting aside for the moment the question of whether the encouragement of voluntary recruitment would have served the same end (which is the Labour Party’s criticism), Mr Chamberlain’s statement is logical only from the standpoint of a politician who accepts the capitalist world as it is, with all its international rivalries and threats of war. Mr Chamberlain seeks to regulate and adjust those rivalries without wholesale war. It is no misrepresentation of him and the Conservative Party to say that they regard the maintenance of British capitalism as an absolute necessity. No matter how much they may personally loathe and fear war, knowing, too, that war, whatever its outcome, will shake capitalism to its foundations, they are yet ready in the last resort to prepare for world war between two rival groups of Powers.

In the meantime Mr Chamberlain apparently still hopes to secure an adjustment with Germany without armed conflict, but how far he still holds to “appeasement” nobody knows but the Cabinet. Last September, “Munich” in effect, gave the German capitalists a more or less free hand in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Now the British Government appears to be blocking Germany’s expansion. Why? Is it growing strength—and the fear that German capitalist lust for expansion and markets is insatiable? Or is it partly bluff, merely the prelude to another Munich? Whatever the answer, British

workers are being made to accept conscription without even real knowledge of the Government's purpose.

The Labour Party has no Case

The Labour Party has announced its determination to oppose conscription, but its opposition is based on the belief "that the voluntary scheme is providing, and can continue to provide, the nation with all the man-power required for effective national defence and for the fulfilment of its obligations for mutual assistance in the collective system of resistance to aggression" (*Statement issued by the National Council of Labour—Daily Herald*, 26th April).

The Labour Party accepts the view that guarantees must be given to countries threatened by German and Italian capitalist expansion and has for months past repeatedly condemned Mr Chamberlain for not "standing up" to Germany and Italy. How then can they convincingly answer Mr Chamberlain's argument that the guaranteed countries themselves urged that Britain adopt conscription? Leon Blum, the leader of the French Socialist Party (the equivalent of the British Labour Party), agrees with Mr Chamberlain in chiding the Labour Party for its illogical attitude. "I am therefore struck", he writes, "and so is the whole of French opinion, by what seems an inexplicable contradiction between the Labour Party's attitude to conscription and its attitude to the Government. Although conscription does not provide an immediate increase to our material force it still increases immensely the British Government's capacity of action for the protection of peace . . ." (Reproduced in the *Manchester Guardian*, 28th April).

It can be said of the British Labour Party that in and since September last they have advocated a foreign policy which involved the risk of war, but now they oppose a step which is put forward by the Government on the plea that it will provide more trained men should war take place. Their opposition, based on the belief in the present sufficiency of voluntary recruitment will inevitably weaken and diminish if the war crisis continues and large-scale war seems imminent. The same kind of weakening took place in 1915 and 1916 over the introduction of conscription then. Starting off in favour of voluntary recruitment the Labour Party found itself more and more won over to supporting conscription.

The Labour Party's attitude then and now is built on an unsound foundation. While claiming in words to repudiate capitalism and capitalist war the Labour Party does not fight against capitalism, but only against some of its effects and developments. In the eyes of the Labour Party, not Capitalism but Fascism is the enemy, just as in 1914 it was Prussianism. Hence their willingness to support capitalist wars "to make the world safe for democracy". Hence their hollow opposition to conscription in 1916 and the certainty that their opposition will diminish again if the crisis continues.

The Communists Face Both Ways

The Communist Party of Great Britain says that it is opposed to conscription. "Down with Conscription" says the *Daily Worker* of 28th April. But Russia has conscription, and the French Communists support conscription there and welcome it in Britain. The French Communist paper *L'Humanité*, in its issue of 27th April, published an article which says:

"It is impossible to contest the far-reaching effect of the British decision. Until it was taken, the guarantees given by Great Britain to Poland, Rumania and Greece were more symbolic than practical".

When Mr Chamberlain quoted this in the House of Commons on 27th April, Mr Gallacher, Communist MP, said that he repudiated the French Communist who wrote the article. And on the same day, when Colonel Wedgwood suggested that the Russian Government wanted conscription here, Mr Gallacher said that "no matter what happens in any country I will stand by the workers of this country, and oppose conscription and oppose the Prime Minister."

In other words, the Communists are in a position which is as false and illogical as that of the Labour Party. Their real aim, at the moment, is not so much to oppose conscription as to get rid of Mr Chamberlain's Government because of its supposed reluctance to enter into alliance with Russia. To do this the Communist *Daily Worker* is prepared to ally itself with supporters of conscription, as witness

the bold headline of 30th March, 1939, appealing to, among others, Mr Winston Churchill, to help in the defeat of the Cabinet!

Quite possibly the British Communists will soon be called to heel by Moscow and told to take up the same attitude to conscription as is taken by the Communists in France.

The Attitude of the Socialist Party

The opposition of the Socialist Party of Great Britain is not that of the Pacifists, though all thoughtful men and women must recognise the weight of the observation that “not one evil that is professed to be avoided by war is greater than war itself.” The pacifist—unless he seeks the overthrow of capitalism—is in the position of accepting the competitive social system which necessarily breeds bitter rivalries and of thinking at the same time that the rivalries can be settled by amicable discussion at the council table.

Nor does the Socialist merely object to that form of compulsion known as conscription. There is little difference between the compulsion of the law which takes the conscript and the compulsion of unemployment which drives “volunteers” to enlist. It has been truly said by a well-known advocate of conscription that “nearly all our so-called volunteers for the Regular Army are hunger-conscripts”.

The Socialist is opposed to conscription because he is opposed to the capitalist war for which the armed forces, whether volunteer, professional or conscript, are wanted. Though the war would be described on the one side as a war “for democracy” and on the other side as a war “against encirclement”, the driving force behind both sides would be the capitalist lust for markets, raw materials and strategic positions. When Hitler for the German capitalists says that Germany must expand or explode, find markets or perish, he meets his opposite in Mr Hudson, British Secretary for Overseas Trade, who said in Warsaw on 21st March that “we are not going to give up any markets to anyone . . . Great Britain is strong enough to fight for markets abroad. Britain is now definitely going to take a greater interest in Eastern Europe” (*News Chronicle*, 22nd March, 1939).

Fighting that at present takes the form of words, trade agreements, loans, guarantees against aggression, etc., may, as in 1914, turn into an armed conflict and that armed conflict will be yet another war produced by capitalist rivalries.

The Socialist Party knows that such wars solve nothing for the workers, and leave capitalism to produce still more wars in endless horror. The Socialist Party declares its opposition not only to conscription but to capitalist war and to capitalism itself. The Socialist Party can repeat now what was written in its official organ in February, 1916, about the conscription then being introduced:

“ . . . we are bitterly opposed to conscription. But what are conscription, war, unemployment, poverty, overwork and starvation wages but the direct results of capitalist class rule? What hope of any permanent amelioration so long as the workers are the underdogs? What hope, indeed, of even a paltry concession in this matter so long as the exploiters are masters of the State and feel their controlling position unmenaced? We, therefore, urge the workers to join in the real campaign against conscription; for conscription, on the part of the governing class, is only one item in the war upon the workers. (*Socialist Standard*, February, 1916).

What is to be Done?

The Government which is introducing conscription has a big majority in Parliament. It got that majority through the votes of the electorate. It can hardly be doubted that at another election now, the same Government would be returned. A large majority of the electors are prepared to support the policy for which the Chamberlain Government declares it needs this conscript army. What then can the Socialist do against the flood of nationalist sentiment and capitalistic ideas? At the moment the size of the Socialist Party and the support given to it by the workers places definite limits upon its actions. We are holding well-supported open-air meetings in London and the provinces at which our view and our Socialist opposition to conscription are explained. If the support for our party were large our opposition to conscription would have been so strong that any government would have had to reckon seriously with it when contemplating introducing the Bill in Parliament. More important still, if there were here and abroad parties holding Socialist views and having the support from the working class that those

views deserve, conscription, like war itself, would be impossible, and so also would be the continuance of capitalism—the breeder of wars.

We therefore urge workers to examine their position under capitalism, and cease to allow their emotions to be played upon by phrases that have little meaning in the mouths of their users.

Our attitude and the workers' real interest calls for not merely anti-conscription, nor anti-war, but anti-Capitalism.

We call upon the workers to join with us in the fight for Socialism. This is the only effective means of getting rid of conscription and of the basis that gives rise to it. Until the workers cease to respond to the call of false nationalist sentiment they will remain what they are—wage slaves in peace, cannon fodder in war.